

# Everybody is a Star!



Disconaut AAA - Association of Autonomous Astronauts

No.3 (Summer 1998)

## *Reclaim the Streets, Reclaim the Stars*

Autonomous Astronauts were strongly represented at the South London Reclaim the Streets party on June 6th. Following simultaneous staged car crashes at both ends of Brixton high street hundreds of people poured into the road for a day long free party with sound systems, a sand pit and much more. Disconaut AAA attached a rocket to a lamp post bearing the slogans "Reclaim Space" and "we don't need cars 'cos we've learnt to fly", the latter a line from Stevie Wonder's space utopian song 'Saturn'. One person was arrested for breathing fire too close to the police lines, illustrating the problems autonomous astronauts may face handling rocket fuels in public.

The week before the street party there was a benefit gig for it at the 121 Centre in Brixton at which Disconaut AAA set up 'Sonic Soup'. This involves a Wasp analog synth and a fostex 4-track, with each of the 4 tracks including a haphazardly assembled sequence of beats, loops and mutated samples from diverse sources. The 4 tracks were assembled independently so that any juxtaposition of sounds from two or more tracks is more or less accidental. The aim of Sonic Soup is to explore some of the range of possibilities offered by music in space, randomly combining sound sources from different parts of the universe, slowed down, speeded up and twisted round by variable gravity fields. In anticipation of the free collective practice made possible in autonomous communities in space, passing voyagers are encouraged to push buttons and turn switches to help mix the ingredients in the soup.

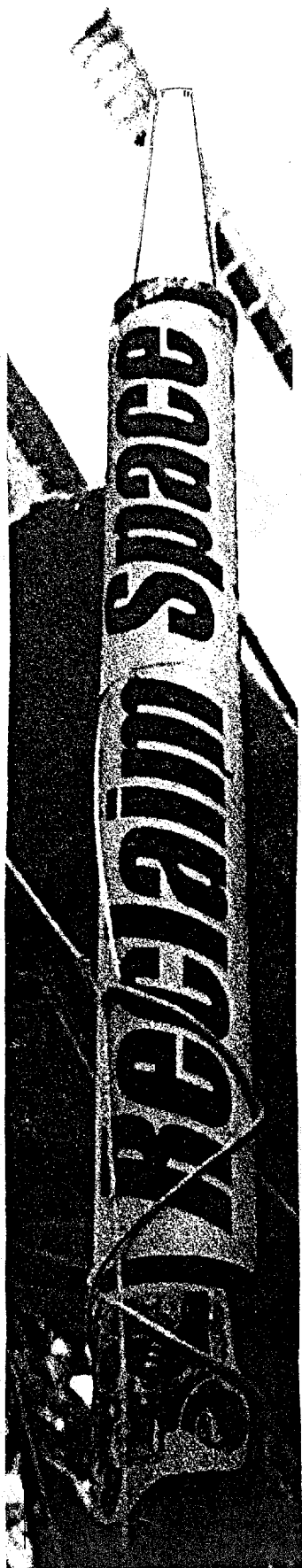
On this occasion the crowd at this mainly punk gig were mostly reluctant to join in, even when the equipment was put on the floor in the middle of them (this contrasted with the more open-minded revellers at the "I didn't do nuthin'" party in the same venue last year). Nevertheless some of the less technophobic did step boldly forward, and there were the usual interesting sound clashes. These included Judy Garland singing "Fly me to the moon" over an Alex Empire backing track, a Todd Terry remix of a Yuri Gagarin speech (fading into Hawkwind chanting "Space is dark it is so endless") and William Burroughs talking about "future space travellers who are ready to leave the whole human context behind" over Deadly Buddha vs. Sun Ra "Strange Celestial Road".

Parts of Sonic Soup were also used recently in a AAA radio programme put together by Inner City AAA on London Musicians' Collective's temporary radio station.

## *Space suits in Clerkenwell*

The Clerkenwell Literary Festival was the unlikely setting for a AAA intervention on July 19th. As part of the festival we were invited along to the Tardis studios to talk about our plans for community based space exploration. Disconaut AAA gave an illustrated talk on Means of Flight - an alphabet for autonomous astronauts (from Astral Projection to Zebedee). The East London, Raido, Oceania, Inner City and Nomad groups also took part with presentations, rants and videos.

Best of all we got to play with a full size space suit, borrowed for a photo shoot (previously used in the film *Murder on the Moon*, which none of us had heard of). Jason (Inner City AAA) conducted an experiment in Djing in the spacesuit in a smokefilled room. Operating the crossfader proved tricky with the large fingers on the gloves, suggesting that for raves in space either the gloves will have to be made smaller or the controls bigger. Unfortunately the experiment had to be curtailed when the sound of Ambush records threatened to disorientate people listening to the band Pierre Jacques in the next room.



# Adventures in Bologna: Conferanza Intergalattica

In April 1998 the Disconauts took part in the second Intergalactic Conference of the Association of Autonomous Astronauts in Bologna, the only city we've visited with a street named after Yuri Gagarin.

The conference provided an opportunity for us to consolidate our programme of community-based space exploration. A report of the events has already been produced by Raldo AAA (published in *Ad Astra*). Here we want to offer some more impressionistic reflections on the whole experience.

The conference began for us with a journey involving four trains and an aeroplane. It was a journey that provided us with some useful material for consideration of travel by other means to further destinations.

Our presentation at the conference, "We are not alone", was to review the recent explosion of interest in space in popular culture. Our thesis that the dreams of autonomous astronauts risked being recuperated by commercial interests was confirmed soon after we had passed under the River Thames from South London. On an underground train at Whitechapel an advertisement promised "with AOL the person seated next to you can also travel to the surface of Mars". The small print clarified that access to Mars was via an internet connection with the NASA website (AOL is an internet provider).

## Into the sky

The launchpad for our flight to Milan was Stanstead Airport. A few weeks after returning from Bologna we came across a book called "Norman Foster and the Architecture of Flight" extolling the supposed wonders of the beloved cathedral of light that is Stanstead and its principal architect. A live rendering of Brian Eno's Music for Airports was performed there around the same time.

To us it just felt like just another sterile place to wait and spend - a shopping mall with a runway attached. This "architecture of flight" is light years away from the launchpads we have in mind for autonomous spaceflight. It is in fact an architecture of control, restricting who has access to flight, restricting the movement of people and things, channelling all travellers into the field of vision of cops, customs officers and immigration officials.

On the plane a found object proved useful. We had prepared a series of A4 panels for the conference illustrating "Means of Flight - an alphabet for autonomous astronauts". This outlined a range of approaches people have tried to experience the sensation of flight, including ballet, characterised according to one dance historian by "the dancers' appearance of lightness and the seeming effortlessness with which they launched themselves through the air, as if gravity were nothing but a minor inconvenience to the dancing body".

In mid-flight we came across a bilingual (Italian/English) magazine cum design catalogue called *Slamp*. Included in it was a striking photo of Rudolf Nureyev suspended in mid-air (performing in 'Lucifer', New York, 1975) and an accompanying article stressing the human body's ability "to defy the force of gravity, as was actually

scientifically observed in the case of mythical Russian dancers, Nijinski and Nureyev". This picture was swiftly torn out and added to our display.

There were further connections in the same publication: a "Sun Ra Collection" of designer lamps (more commercial recuperation?) and a picture of an alarmingly phallic "Chronomorphic spaceship" with the caption: "The spaceship is prepared for the journey it must face like an ammunition clip which consumes itself flowing slowly, changing its shape on the basis of the time travelled during the journey. Thus the length of the spaceship is not measured in spatial units but in temporal units".

The act of translating "Means of Flight" also proved instructive. We had argued that it is no coincidence that so many fairground rides feature rockets and spaceships because fairgrounds are the astronaut training centres of the working class, a place where we get to experiment with gravity and its effects on the body. Our thesis was dramatically confirmed by our Italian/English dictionary. The Italian for fairground: Luna Park.



*Means of Flight: B is for Broomstick*

## Shelley in Bologna

Our hotel was in Via Rizzoli, opposite the leaning brick towers described by Percy Shelley on his visit to Bologna in 1818: "There are two towers here, one 400 foot high, ugly things built out of brick which lean both different ways, and with the delusion of moonlight shadows you almost fancy the city is rocked by an earthquake". In his poetry, Shelley anticipated some of the themes explored 180 years later by the AAA, combining a passion for radical politics and human self-determination with an interest in astronomy. His 'Queen Mab' features a chariot flight to the stars from where the fairy queen denounces the rule of kings, priests and commerce.

Shelley believed that poets had a clairvoyant function as "the mirrors of gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present". It is possible that what Shelley sensed in Bologna was not a trick of the light but an echo of the future earthquakes that would shake the city: the social earthquake of 1977, when the city was the centre of conflicts between the subversive movement and the old order, or possibly the city being shaken to its foundations by a AAA rocket exiting gravity from the Bologna launchpad early in the 21st century.

## The Link

The venue for the conference was the Link in Via Fioravanti, a former warehouse described in the Rough Guide to Italy as a "centro sociale" with "a cyber style bar upstairs and an enormous dancefloor downstairs. Avant garde performance art... with ambient or techno sounds later". We pondered whether we were to be served up as performance art for a curious audience.

The main session of the conference featured presentations from AAA groups based in various earth sectors including England, France, Italy and Austria (detailed in Raido AAA's report). There were some very interesting contributions, although for future conferences we would like to move away from the format of a platform of speakers addressing the audience from the front - in space there is no front or back.

After a meal in the Link's café, the party kicked off. The Link is obviously a top night out for the Bologna massive. Coldcut and On U Sound are recent visitors, and sometime Portishead DJ Andy Smith has listed the Link as his favourite place to DJ (Mixmag, July 1998). As well as three separate dance spaces, there is a bar, a café and a bookshop. Most of the 1000+ people there hadn't been at the day conference, although the AAA presence was strongly represented at the party with AAA DJs at the controls in two of the rooms and the AAA logo flashing on video monitors throughout.

"Raves in Space" are a central feature of the AAA programme, but there is an ongoing debate about what the future sounds of outer space should be. While we strongly defend blissed out glammed up disco hedonism, others feel that this is too commercial and that only more experimental electronica is appropriate.

In our view it is the relations formed between people in a sonic situation that determines its liberatory potential, not how formally radical the music itself is. Thus a mixed gay/ straight/ black/ white/ male/ female crowd dancing at a free party to house music takes us further out of this world than, say, ten boys stroking their goatees to techno at the ICA.

Nevertheless our experience of the distorted beats and sonic terrorism played in the "Rave in Space" and "Anti Ambient" areas in Bologna convinced us that this has a specific role to play in astronaut training. Dancing to unpredictable rhythms simulates the impact of take off, with the body pulled in different directions by sudden changes in gravitational effects. The experience was intensified through severe strobe lighting, disrupting the use of visual co-ordinates to navigate by.

With 4:4 beats on the other hand the body can settle into automatic motion. This can, however, free the imagination to take flight, itself a very useful faculty for would-be astronauts.

## Reclaiming the stars

Patric O'Brien (East London AAA) gave a conference presentation on Reclaim the Stars, an event to be held in East London on the summer solstice drawing on the work of Giordano Bruno. Bruno was burnt in Rome by the Inquisition for his heretical views including his support for Copernicus' understanding that the earth moves around the sun rather than the other way round.

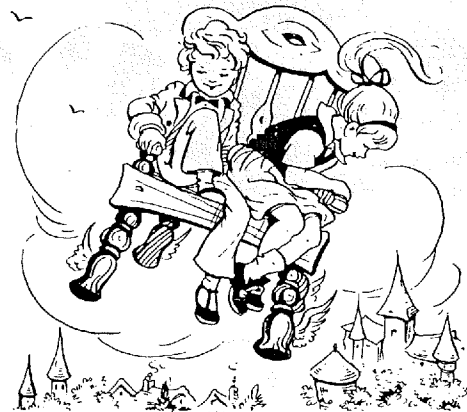
Bruno's fate is symptomatic of an age in which the question of our relationship to the stars was a matter of life and death. Evidence of the importance of this relationship was furnished on our Sunday morning wander around the city. We spent some time in San Petronio, a 14th century cathedral featuring 'an astronomical clock - a long brass meridian line set at an angle across the floor, with a hole left in the roof for the sun to shine through onto the right spot'. The signs of the zodiac were marked along the line, as was the winter solstice.

Reclaiming the stars will involve regaining this sense of an intimate connection between human beings and the wider cosmos, while freeing it from much of the traditional baggage of the kind of astrology used by kings and priests to maintain their power in Bologna and elsewhere.

## Feeling gravity's pull

Sunday afternoon was set aside for a AAA training day in the giardini margherita, a fine park on the outskirts of the city. Unfortunately rain had stopped play in the three-sided football game by the time we got there. We were however able to undertake some astronaut training of our own, experimenting with gravity on the park's trampolines.

While one Disconaut displayed a very primitive technique, another managed to execute a 180 degree turn in mid air. In every trampoline jump there comes a moment of near weightlessness, that split second when the body slows down and seems to freeze in mid-air before being pulled back to earth. By concentrating on this moment it is possible to stretch it, in imaginative time at least, and to get a clear sense of the workings of gravity on the body.



longing to be off into the air once more.

"Go to Chinky's home," commanded Peter. The chair rose up into the air, flew out of the door and rose high above the trees. It was fun to fly

*Means of flight: W is for Wishing Chair*

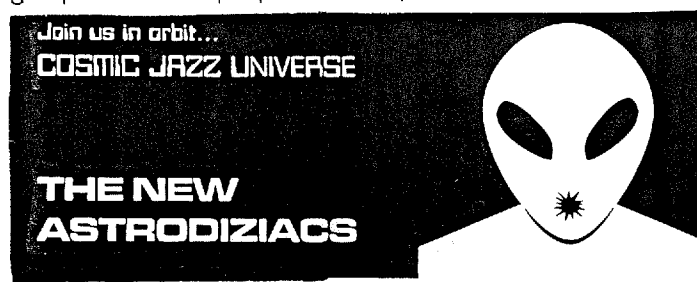
## Space 1999

We are now considering proposals to hold the next AAA Intergalactic Conference in London. Space 1999 will develop some of the ideas from Bologna as well as including new elements such as a structured experiential programme of astronaut training. The dates have provisionally been set for the 19th-26th June 1999. Contact us for further details.

## Jazzmonauts are go?

We came across a flyer recently for a club at Brixton Bug Bar called "The New Astrodiziaks - Cosmic Jazz Universe". The flyer proclaims "Our mission - to go where no jazzmonaut has gone before - It's Jazz but not as we know it". We haven't been able to check this out yet, but we would strongly encourage them to start their own AAA group. Most AAA groups (like our own) have been based around dance music and techno, with the exception of SHITS (Skinheads as Independent Travellers in Space) and their ska-focused Skinhead Moonstomp webzine. Autonomous space travel has been explored in many other musical scenes and this needs to be looked at in more detail.

Why not a Jazzmonaut AAA, a GlamAAA (Ziggy Stardust etc.), a Space Ritual AAA (Hawkwind) or an Easy Listening AAA (Space Age Bachelor Pad Music)? Why not a Music of the Spheres AAA, looking at occult strands of classical music and the notion of musical scales linked to the planets. A PunkAAA might be harder work; as a movement it was self-consciously earthbound - but there was the Rezillos "Flying Saucer Attack" and Spizz Energi "Where's Captain Kirk?". There's also a rich vein of indie sounds, like Galaxie 500 and Spacemen 3. For the Space 1999 Inter-galactic Conference in London we would like to arrange a symposium with people talking about and playing space music in its full diversity. In the mean time we propose that AAA groups should swap tapes of their space sounds of choice.



## SinatrAAA

The recent physical death of Frank Sinatra was of little consequence as he had creatively died many years before, even sinking so low as to become a right-wing court entertainer for Reagan. The earlier Sinatra was another matter, investigated by McCarthy for his alleged "unamerican" radical views and singing of love and rockets, or trips to the stars at any rate. In memory of this long dead Sinatra we reproduce some lyrics of inspiration for autonomous astronauts:

"Would you like to swing on a star,  
carry moonbeams home in a jar"

"in the heavens, stars are dancing"

"Night and day you are the one  
Only you 'neath the moon or under the sun"

"Come fly with me, lets fly, lets fly away"

"Fly me to the moon and let me live amongst the stars,  
let me feel what life is like on Jupiter or Mars"

## AAA: Is this a joke or what?

When the AAA criticise the military and commercial monopoly of space exploration many people agree with us. The obscene waste of the militarisation of space is self-evident. On August 12 a billion dollars was written off when a US Air Force rocket carrying a secret spy satellite exploded 42 seconds after lift-off from Cape Canaveral in Florida.

But when we talk about establishing a practical alternative in the form of autonomous community-based space programmes many of these same people think we must be joking. Of course humour is part of our strategy, but we are also deadly serious.

The technology to put humans into space has been around for 40 years and is no big deal. The Space Shuttle and Mir Space Station programmes have shown that with a bit of training almost anybody could be an astronaut. In August 1998 for instance a Russian bureaucrat visited Mir along with two professional cosmonauts.

There is already an enormous amount of activity in space. Rockets are being launched all the time, mainly to put satellites into orbit. Is it really any more absurd to propose, as we do, experiments with dancing or sex in space than to launch vehicles in space in order to beam down old movies or endless repeats of 1970s sitcoms?

Much of the activity undertaken by astronauts and cosmonauts at present is commercially sponsored. There is no reason why, say, a housing estate in south London couldn't adopt a space-flight on a non-commercial basis with a couple of people at a time going into orbit and others communicating with them from the ground.

It should be obvious that the barriers to community-based space exploration are not technical, but social. This contradiction will become more acute in the next few years as new technologies make space travel potentially more accessible. Only the AAA is asking whether these technologies will be used to expand capital's domination beyond planet earth or as tools to develop new human possibilities.

30 year ago revolutionaries scrawled the slogan "be realistic, demand the impossible" on the walls of Paris during the events of May 1968. We want to go further - not just demanding the impossible, but attempting it. Only those who attempt the impossible will achieve the absurd. Above the paving stones the stars!

The Association of Autonomous Astronauts is a non-hierarchical network of local, community-based space exploration programmes (see [www.uncarved.demon.co.uk/aaa.html](http://www.uncarved.demon.co.uk/aaa.html)). Why not start your own? Disconaut AAA was set up to explore the potential of dance cultures for autonomous space exploration. You can see other Disconaut material at [www.uncarved.demon.co.uk/dnaut.html](http://www.uncarved.demon.co.uk/dnaut.html). Our e-mail address is [practicalhistory@hotmail.com](mailto:practicalhistory@hotmail.com) or you can write to us c/o Practical History, 121 Railton Road, London SE24.